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ABSTRACT

In this speech, the author discusses the use of the management by objectives (MBO) approach as a means for accomplishing accountability. He traces the steps to be taken by participants -- from superintendent to school staff -- in implementing an MBO program. (JF)

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SPEAKER: Terrel H. Bell, Superintendent, Granite School District, Salt Lake City, Utah

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Introduction

In the minds of many, accountability is a "shape up or ship out" proposition. Accountability has been concerned with fixing responsibility for failure upon individuals. This presentation rejects this orientation toward accountability. Referring to the key words of both ends and means (as used in the title of this address), I suggest that the ends of accountability should focus upon students. The rhetoric on accountability has, as I see it, concerned itself more than can be justified with blame fixing for failures and shortcomings. The ends of accountability should be concerned with serving students and solving problems identified through assessment of educational needs of students. Now, there is nothing new in these points just made. I make them--trite as they are--merely to make sure that what I am about to say is understood.

The means of attaining accountability will occupy most of my presentation, although I do want to get back to the ends of accountability later in this address. But, let me discuss with you a somewhat extensive description of a model that, I believe, will provide the means for accountability.

MBO As a Management System

Oriented to Attaining Institution-Wide Performance Accountability

Many of us in leadership positions in education have for some time been concerned about how we might devise a means that would make school management become more results oriented with the outputs becoming a prime source of concentration and concern on the part of school managers. In this quest for results oriented management we have been turning more and more to the system of management utilized by industry wherein annual goals are set and the entire resources of an organization are focused upon attaining certain specified objectives. This management system has been called management by objectives. School management by objectives is becoming a topic of increasing concern as some of the larger school systems across the nation turn to this management system as a means of attaining performance accountability. MBO involves a

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total institution. Its focus is upon institutional performance rather that the performance of individuals. It is, therefore, not as threatening to teachers and other staff members as are those accountability programs that center attention on the specific performance of individual teachers.

I would like to describe in brief, outline form how an MBO system functions in a school district. From this description you may be able to judge more clearly the potential of MBO as a means to performance accountability.

The first step in an MBO system is to conduct an assessment of the most critical educational needs in the school district. This assessment should try to identify the problems most urgently in need of solution.

The second step in the MBO program calls for the chief executive officer, usually the superintendent of schools, to review the results of the needs assessment and to identify some high level performance priorities. These priorities should be issued in tentative form only. The chief executive, in issuing these performance priorities, will be saying to the professional staff in the school system that these are, in his view, after careful study of the needs assessment effort, the specific problems that need district-wide attention and effort toward solution.

The third step in the MBO program is a system-wide critique of the superintendent's tentative performance priorities. The staff should have an opportunity to add to and subtract from the tenntative priorities. This should provide an opportunity for the entire professional staff to engage in some lively discussions around the subject of what is and what had ought to be in terms of performance outcomes that should be sought on a high priority level for the coming academic year. Each member school in the school system should offer back to the superintendent a very candid response to the tentative performance priorities.

The fourth step in the MBO program is for the chief executive officer to review all of the feedback received from the schools in the school system and to then formulate his final performance priorities for the coming academic year. At this point, the superintendent will issue a number of performance priority statements that will describe the major problems of the school system that will receive special attention and special management concern from the school district.

These performance priorities should describe problems with sufficient back-up information to justify and call attention to the need for a major campaign throughout the year to solve them.

The fifth step in the MBO program is for each school to review carefully the final performance priority statements issued by the superintendent. The principal and the faculty should examine the local school performance to determine if their particular school is contributing to the major problem that has been identified on the district level. Some performance priorities will require attention of some schools but will occupy little or no concern from others. For example, a performance priority calling for a decrease in drop out rates will be an item of higher concern to secondary schools than to elementary schools. A performance priority description calling attention to low achievement in basic study skills in reading and arithmetic may be a district-wide problem, but it will certainly occupy more specific attention from elementary schools than from senior high schools. (This is not to say that basic study skills are not also the concern of senior high schools.)

Each school in the school district should complete a critical analysis of the local problems and performance concerns, giving due consideration and attention to the superintendent's performance priorities. The school should identify problems that it should strive to solve during the coming academic year. These problems should be responsive to the chief executive's performance priorities but they are also a source of concern to the principal and the faculity on the local school level.

The sixth step in the MBO program is for each local school to prepare written objectives requiring special management concern during the coming academic year. These written objectives should be performance oriented. That is, they should state in quantifiable terms insofar as is possible what will be accomplished within a certain time frame. The objectives should say how much and by when.

Some objectives are very important, but hard to quantify. These aspects of the school program should not be ignored. However, to the largest extent possible, the written objectives should be specific and should be expressed in outcome oriented language that will make it possible for all concerned to measure and understand when and if the objective has been reached.

Usually, the school should limit its major objectives to ten or less. It is important to emphasize that all of the performance outcomes of the school will not be committed to written performance objectives. Only those high priority problems that are going to occupy special attention and an unusual effort will be committed to objectives to be accomplished by special management during the coming academic year. When a school system first begins to implement an MBO system it is usually recommended that approximately three objectives be adopted by each school for special management concern. Following mastery of the management system in subsequent years more objectives can be adopted and effectively managed. During the learning phase it is recommended that the number of written objectives be kept to a minimum.

The seventh step in an MBO program is for the central office staff to review and respond to the written objectives prepared by the local school unit. The central office should check carefully to see that a major performance priority issued by the superintendent that should be an item of high priority concern by a particular school because of its known performance deficiencies is not ignored. If a school is contributing to a particular high level deficiency the central office staff should attempt to persuade the principal and the faculty to revise its objectives to prepare one that will be responsive to the particular district-wide performance priority that needs attention.

Objectives should not be imposed upon a school by the central office. If the central office cannot persuade the principal and faculity to revise their list of objectives, there should be no effort to dictatorially impose upon the local school. Only those objectives that have the commitment and concern of the principal and faculty will have a chance for accomplishment during an academic year. Imposed objectives not accepted by the faculty and the principal will most likely not result in beneficial results for anyone.

Additionally, the central office staff should make sure that the resources necessary to accomplish the objectives submitted by the school will be available for the coming academic year. It is important that the central office give the necessary support and make the needed commitments on the district level so that the local school unit will have a good chance of realizing the objectives that they have submitted.

The eighth step in the MBO program is for the local school to prepare final written objectives for the coming academic year. These objectives become a performance commitment between the school and the superintendent. When the final written objectives are submitted to the central office the school has pledged to make a special effort to reach some highly desirable performance outcomes during the coming academic year. Certain quantifiable results will be attained by certain specific times. A special effort will be mounted to solve specific problems that have been identified so that the school will be more effectively meeting the needs of its students.

This is where the school unit performance accountability effort comes into focus. This is the point at which we attain results oriented management and accountability that applies to an entire school rather than to a specific individual. The principal and the faculty have committed itself and the central office has also committed itself to certain supportive activities.

The ninth step in the MBO program is one of operational planning. For each objective adopted by the local school unit some time-phased action steps must be prepared. These time-phased action steps will constitute a road map or a travel itinerary. Through operational planning, the school unit will try to specify certain action that will be taken by certain deadlines that the school will fix upon itself in order to move in an orderly and sequential procedure to realize the major performance outcome represented by a significant objective that was adopted and committed to the central office. The time-phased action steps should spell out who will do what by when. It should show how resource commitments will be made and what has to be done by what time in order for a highly desirable and largely important performance outcome to be reached during the academic year. This operational planning phase is very important. It is vital that all faculty members having responsibilities for reaching the major objective have an opportunity to participate in the operational planning and in setting forth alternative ideas for reaching certain specific outcomes.

The tenth step in the management by objectives program is the operational implementation of the action steps during the academic year. Steps one through nine should have been accomplished prior to the opening of school for an academic year. Preparations should be ready so that the on-going school program will move forward and the special efforts to manage for specific outcomes can be implemented during the year.

Step eleven in the MBO system calls for regular monitoring of progress in reaching each of the major objectives adopted by the school during the academic year. This monitoring of progress is usually accomplished by holding monthly management review conferences. These conferences are called by the superintendent of schools or by his designated representative. On a monthly basis, the principal and staff members selected by him sit down around the table and discuss their stewardship in reaching the performance outcomes and major objectives that were committed for the year. These management review conferences provide opportunity for open dialogue centered around problems that require coordination and cooperation throughout the entire school bureaucracy. If certain central office support is not making it possible for the school to reach its objectives this management review provides an opportunity for the principal to express his concern to the superintendent of schools.

The management review conferences have, in my experience, been the most productive aspect of the entire MBO system. These conferences force coordination, communication, and cooperative support among all the elements of a large and complex school system.

These conferences provide an opportunity for the superintendent of schools to review the performance commitments that the school unit has made to him. But more importantly the management review conferences provide a forum for the principal to communicate his problems and to solicit understanding and support that is necessary if true performance accountability is to be attained in reaching major objectives on the local school level.

The twelfth step in the management by objectives program is an end of the year evaluation of the performance outcomes. At this point, it is determined how well the school did in reaching its objectives and major performance commitments during the year. The evaluation can give recognition for outstanding performance. What is more important, however, is that the evaluation can make it possible for all concerned to assess outcomes and determine how more effective team work and cooperation can be attained as a new academic year and MBO cycle is launched.

The thirteenth and final step in the MBO program is preparation for a new needs assessment effort and the launching of a new MBO cycle for the subsequent school year.

The foregoing explanation has attempted to paint for you a word picture of MBO as a means for attaining performance accountability. As I see it, schools need a management system around which plans can be laid to solve problems and reach ever higher level of accomplishment in serving the needs of students. MBO provides the school administrator with a systematic procedure for involving his staff in problem solving efforts. If properly executed, MBO can be democratic in the best traditions of involving professional colleagues in participatory management. MBO keeps all of the staff members looking at the same targets and pulling toward performance outcomes that faculty mambers have accepted as desirable objectives worthy of special attention and concern. MBO provides the road map that all can read and from which all can attain a certain sense of momentum and accomplishment during the year. If a school does not know where it is going any road will get it there. But if a school can arrive at concensus concerning certain highly desirable outcomes that ought to and can be attained during an academic year, MBO will provide the administrative machinery for accomplishment.

I first learned about management by objectives during my tenure in the United States Office of Education. You may recall that the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare has been labeled an unmanageable bureaucracy. I observed former Secretary Elliot Richardson as he implemented the MBO system in HEW. I had the painful responsibility, as Acting Commissioner, to learn about MBO as we applied these principles in the U.S. Office of Education. Following my federal experience with MBO, I became convinced that schools could gain much from utilization of this management system as a means for attaining performance accountability.

In the Granite school system of Salt Lake City we have had modest success in implementing this management system in a school district with 63,000 students and 72 schools. I do not believe that I am exaggerating when I report to you that the principles have moved from a point of frustration to one of considerable enthusiasm and support for MBO. We find that it provides the administrative means for accountability and

that its requirement for involvement of the faculty in dialogue and decision making helps us to know that we will have utilized the collective wisdom of the entire staff in pointing in the direction that we should go as a school system. Whether it be MBO or some other administrative machinery public education needs the results orientation and performance accountability mandated by a management system. Many of our large secondary schools are very difficult to manage in a manner that coordinates the efforts of the staff, keeps lines of communication open, and permits the professionals to have a voice and a hand in the steering of the school toward its priority goals. As I see it, we are going to hear more about the accountability movement and a management system such as MBO will help us to channel this interest and concern in a constructive way.

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